

Prudential Building
(Guaranty Building)
28 Church Street, southeast corner
of Pearl and Church Streets
Buffalo
Erie County
New York

HABS No. NY-5487

HABS
NY
15-BUF
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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

PRUDENTIAL BUILDING
(GUARANTY BUILDING)HABS
NY,
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Location: 28 Church Street, southwest corner of Pearl and Church Streets, Buffalo, Erie County, New York

Present Owner: Buffalo Holding Corporation

Present Occupant: 275 offices, restaurant, and bank

Present Use: Office building

Statement of Significance: The Prudential Building is a mature work of the architectural firm of Adler and Sullivan. In response to new materials, structural systems, and industrial aesthetics, Sullivan developed a new mode of expression which was original, sophisticated, and nearly devoid of historical references. The structure was designated a National Historic Landmark in May 1975.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: April, 1894 to April, 1895.
2. Architect: The firm of Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Built by the Guaranty Building Company, the Prudential Building was sold in 1895, to the Chicago Syndicate headed by Leonard Downis. In 1945, it was owned by the Prudential Company. The Buffalo Holding Company--the present owners--purchased the building in 1955.
4. Builder: Guaranty Construction Company, General Contractors, Chicago.
5. Original plans: The original plans have not been located. Walter Cunningham, building manager, has blueprints of some of the original plans. Although Sullivan designed the whole ornamental scheme, George Grant Elmslie was responsible for the detailed, working drawings for most of the decoration. Sullivan detailed the entire cornice and the capitals. Two drawings of the capitals are located in the Avery Library, Columbia University. A complete set of floor plans was published in a descriptive pamphlet, Guaranty Building, Buffalo, 1896.

6. Alterations and additions: During the years, various methods of modernizations have been used for cosmetic appearances and compliance with fire regulations. The capitals of the isolated piers on the ground story were squared off by the insertion of corrugated sheeting. During restoration, 1969-70, the original projecting window bays of the shop windows were uncovered. New glass in anodized aluminum frames was installed in the early 1970s. This new glazing is set behind the columns, making them free-standing from the first floor to the under side of the second floor. The terra cotta column cap sections that remained behind the corrugated infill have been re-positioned to the street side of the columns. Lucite drop ceilings have been removed from the front and rear lobbies. The open, semicircular stair landing has been removed. Two of the iron balusters have been mounted above the automatic elevators. The open, electric elevators with decorative grills have been replaced to comply with fire codes. After the present management assumed ownership, the top eleven stories were sandblasted.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

When the building was planned and opened, the United States Weather Bureau occupied the northwest corner office suite on the thirteenth floor.

The original owner and operator of the Prudential Building, the Guaranty Building Company, had as its officers in 1896, George M. Moulton, President; W. D. Richardson, Vice-President; Charles H. Keep, Treasurer; and George Baker Long, Secretary. The building was renamed the Prudential Building in 1899.

On February 21, 1974, a fire on the tenth floor resulted in severe smoke and water damage to the upper floors, as well as minor damage to the facade. Repairs were undertaken. At this time, the owners offered the building to the public realm. John Randall, State University of New York at Buffalo, has developed plans to open a museum of Sullivan and Wright artifacts in the building.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: A minimum of six catalogued photographs are contained in the Iconographic Collections of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. The Architectural Photographing Company (Henry Fuermann) has a collection of interior and exterior photographs pre-dating 1899.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Slade, Thomas M. "A Collated Edition of Louis H. Sullivan's Kindergarten Chats." Unpublished thesis, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1971.

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b. Secondary and published sources:

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Paul, Sherman. Louis Sullivan, An Architect in American Thought. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962.

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_____. A System of Architectural Ornament. Facsimile Edition. Park Forest, Ill.: The Prairie School Press, 1961.

_____. "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered." Inland Architect and News Record, May, 1896, pp. 32-4.

Winslow Bros. Co., Chicago, Ill. Ornamental and Architectural Iron, Bronze, and Brass Work. Chicago, n.d.

c. Likely sources not yet investigated:

Office papers of the Guaranty Construction Company and the Guaranty Building Company.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: As a skeletal structure sheathed in ornament, the Prudential Building presents an efficient and aesthetic solution for the late nineteenth-century commercial office building, the skyscraper.
2. Condition of fabric: Undetermined, since no site visit has been made since the 1974 fire.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 116 feet on Church Street, 93 feet on Pearl Street; seven bays by six bays; rectangular first floor, U-shaped above; thirteen stories.
2. Foundations: The foundations are composed of isolated footings of reinforced concrete.
3. Wall construction: The framework is steel with floors, partitions, and roof of fire-clay tile. The entire exterior is hung with terra cotta cladding which consists of rectangular blocks with geometrical organic ornament.
4. Chimneys: One chimney is located in the south wall of the west arm.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways: The center entrance in the Church Street (north) facade is recessed and raised three steps above the sidewalk level. The modern aluminum and glass doors are topped by an ornamented bronze lintel containing the building name. A five-arched cast arcade set in front of a marble wall is located above the lintel. This entrance is framed by terra cotta sheathed piers which are topped by an entablature covered with terra cotta cladding. The name of the building is worked into the series of relief circles which decorates this element. A cornice and projecting frame of a second-floor lunette, top the whole entrance composition. The Pearl Street (east) entrance has a similar treatment. This recessed entrance is raised one step above the sidewalk level. Open stairways to the basement and first floor project into the sidewalk area from the north-west corner of the building.

- b. Windows: The plate-glass window bays of the first floor, which fill only two-thirds of the bays, isolate the terra cotta sheathed columns from the wall plane. A strong horizontal cornice defines the lower two stories. The second story contains bay-wide "Chicago windows" set in a simple rectilinear scheme. Unbroken, narrow vertical piers rise from this cornice to the twelfth floor. Narrow, double-hung windows are framed by the terra cotta sheathed piers. The richly decorated spandrels are slightly recessed from the piers. The piers terminate in an arcade at the top of the twelfth floor. The thirteenth floor contains circular windows which pierce the cove cornice. There are two circular windows per bay. Each window is the center of an elaborate foliate terra cotta decoration.
6. Roof: The flat roof is covered with fire-clay tile. The cove cornice is finished with a narrow flat running geometric pattern. Decorative foliage branching from the corner piers extends up through the cove and over the cornice.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The Church Street entrance leads to an enclosed vestibule which opens to the east-west entrance hall containing four elevators. Single entrances open from the hall to a small shop, 14 feet by 18 feet, west of the vestibule; a larger commercial space, 33 feet by 59 feet, at the northwest corner; and a square area, 49 feet by 46 feet--originally intended for a bank--at the northeast corner. An open stairwell to the west of the elevator bank rises to the second floor. The Pearl Street entrance opens to an enclosed vestibule which leads to a rear east-west hall containing a postal counter backed against the elevator core and a stairway to the basement. The hall terminates at a door to the commercial area in the northwest corner of the building. There is a single entrance to the northeast or bank area. Two entrances open from the hall to the commercial area--31 feet by 101 feet--located along the south side of the building. Skylights opening from the light court above illuminate the western end of the hall. The second floor contains a series of interconnected offices--each one bay wide--which are located along the north side of the building. Originally the two arms facing the court were open areas. Each of the succeeding floors contains a series of office suites arranged around a U-shaped corridor. Each office or room has at least two windows.

Each room was furnished originally with a marble washstand with hot and cold water. Cabinet finished coat-rooms were located in every office. Oak telephone closets were furnished where desired. Many rooms were equipped with vaults. The thirteenth floor contains offices along the north and east walls. The west arm originally contained a stairway to the roof, a large storeroom, male and female janitorial locker rooms, a locker room for elevator men, and a fan chamber. The west side of the east arm contained a storeroom. On the seventh floor, the west arm contained a gentlemen's lavatory, two bathrooms, and a barber shop. A smaller, six-stall ladies' toilet room was located on the west side of the east arm. In the original plan, the basement contained a large restaurant along the north wall. The kitchen was located on the west wall. The first-floor area intended for a bank had access via a semi-circular stairway to a large storeroom and vault in the northeast corner. There was also an engine room with an independent electrical plant and three boilers, and a bicycle storage room.

2. Stairways: A stairway extends from the first floor to the thirteenth floor. Originally a cantilevered landing between the first and second floor was exposed in the south, east-west hall. The entire stairway is composed of cast-iron elements containing typical Sullivan ornament. A straight-run stair leads to the basement from the west end of the rear, or south, east-west hall.
3. Flooring: The floors were laid with elaborate marble mosaics.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The corridors, stairways, toilet and bathrooms have pink Tennessee marble wainscoting. The elevator shafts and stairways are faced with glazed brick. All ceilings and office walls are plaster.
5. Doorways and doors: Mexican mahogany and oak were used for the interior woodwork. The original office doors had panels of chipped plate glass.
6. Special decorative features: The mosaic stained-glass ceiling in the rear lobby is composed of circular leaded glass panels set in pierced cast-iron frames. The glass pieces are in tints of yellow, mauve, and green. The front lobby has a seventeen-foot high ceiling decorated with a mosaic pattern designed by Sullivan. Ori-

ginally all exposed plaster work in the lobbies was covered with a geometric mosaic.

7. Hardware: Originally all hardware, including elevator enclosures, door knobs, and door plates was cast with Sullivanesque foliate patterns.
8. Lighting: All major original fixtures have been removed. Old photographs by Fuermann show long, cylindrical, ornamental cast-iron and glass wall lamps on either side of the two main entrances. Also apparent in these photographs are two lampposts flanking the exterior stairway entrance to the basement restaurant. Decorated cast-iron posts supported a large single globe which was collared by a ring containing many exposed single bulbs.
9. Heating: Old radiators have been replaced by hot air convectors. Originally, currents of fresh air were provided to all rooms by means of a vacuum ventilating system.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The Prudential Building is located on a busy corner in the center of Buffalo's recently renovated downtown area. It is part of a cluster of buildings centered around the foot of Main Street and Ellicott Square. These buildings include the Ellicott Square Building of 1895, by D. H. Burnham; St. Paul's Cathedral, 1849-75, by Richard Upjohn (HABS No. NY-5612); the Manufacturers and Traders Trust Building, 1963-66, by Yamasaki; and the Erie County Savings Bank, 1968-70, by Harrison and Abramowitz.
2. Walks: A sidewalk continues around the north and east sides of the building.

Prepared by Susan R. Slade
September 1973

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This photo-data book was prepared as part of a 1964-65 recording project in co-operation with the Buffalo-Western New York Chapter of AIA, Olaf William Shelgren (at that time Chairman of the Chapter's Preservation Committee), and Olaf William Shelgren, Jr.--both of the firm Shelgren, Patterson and Marzec. Photographs were taken in May, 1965, by Jack E. Boucher, HABS staff photographer. Under the direction

of John C. Poppeliers, Chief, HABS, a further research and editorial project was undertaken in September, 1973, by Susan R. Slade, architectural historian.